

MODERN ART AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

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“MODERN ART” *and the*
AMERICAN PUBLIC

A STATEMENT BY THE INSTITUTE
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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"MODERN ART" *and the* AMERICAN PUBLIC

THIRTY-FIVE years ago today, at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City, this country opened its portals to the advanced painting of Europe. The impact of this event on our culture was powerful, for the "Armory Show" brought to America a revolution in the arts which was already in full swing abroad. So-called "modern art," over which controversy raged, electrified the American artist. It offered a new horizon, a sense of forces released, an opportunity for rebellion against stilted academic procedures.

Like all revolutionary movements, modern art had its imaginative leaders and brilliant apologists, its struggle with reaction, its ideology and its politics, its merits, its shortcomings. Now that a full generation has passed since its inception, it has become imperative to re-appraise the movement.

Throughout the nineteenth century the artist was forced to explore himself in order to determine his relation to society. Art became increasingly introspective, and the artist gradually withdrew from a common meeting-ground with the public. This tendency culminated inevitably in the subjective experiments conducted by a group of painters active in Paris during the decade preceding the First World War. The results were altogether valid.

A CULT OF BEWILDERMENT

Subsequently, the dangers in this withdrawal multiplied. Modern art failed to speak clearly. Instead, the characteristics of a few inspired innovators were so distorted by others less competent, and their real contributions so debased, that there emerged a general cult of bewilderment. This cult rested on the hazardous foundations of obscurity and negation, and utilized a private, often secret, language which required the aid of an interpreter. Paradoxically, interpretation itself became a barrier to the natural function of art—free, unimpeded contact with the observer. Valid artistic expression was often exploited for purposes of propaganda or sensationalism; and once the gap between artist and public was widened sufficiently, it became an attractive playground for double-talk, opportunism and chicanery at the public expense.

In the last analysis, an innocent phrase, "modern art," denoting simply the art of our times, came to signify for millions something unintelligible, even meaningless. Today, however, "modern art" describes a style which is taken for granted; it has had time to run its course and, in the pattern of all historic styles, has become both dated and academic.

A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

1. As long as the creative artist remains ahead of his time—and he should always be encouraged to earn this precedence—the need for interpretation will exist. The inevitable gap between artist and public, however, will be narrowed where such interpretation is conscientious and forthright.

2. We believe that any institution dedicated to the simple principle that contemporary art should be fostered has this primary function:

It must attempt to distinguish the good art from the bad, the sincere from the sham, the perceptive from the obtuse. It must also proclaim standards of excellence which the public may comprehend. These responsibilities cannot be evaded on the grounds that time may reverse such judgments.

3. We enjoin the artist to exercise his historic role of spiritual leadership, and to forge closer ties with an ever growing public in terms of common understanding. Nature and mankind remain an inexhaustible source of inspiration. World chaos and social unrest, which prompted many of the excesses of modern art, are still with us, but the artist should not take refuge in private cynicism. If he is to help build a culture able to counteract the trend toward world dissolution, he must come forward with a strong, clear affirmation of truth for humanity.

4. We are convinced that, for our part, maximum public service lies in endorsement of that art which is the full embodiment of the artist's creative impulse and draws strength both from experiment and tradition. We need no longer judge the art of our time solely in terms of an intellectual revolution which, from all indications, appears to have been brought to a close by the outbreak of war in 1939. Nor is this statement in any sense an invitation to reaction. We are unalterably opposed to extremism of the die-hard conservative kind, which is a dangerous obstruction to creative progress.

OUR endorsement will take the form of exhibition, publication and, where possible, the effective integration of art with commerce and industry. In order to give full emphasis to these objectives, and in order to disassociate the policy and program of this institution from the widespread and injurious misunderstandings which surround the term "modern art," the Corporation has today changed its name from The Institute of Modern Art to

THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

For the Trustees and Corporation:

NELSON W. ALDRICH, *President*

JAMES S. PLAUT, *Director*

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devoted to the encouragement of all phases of creative activity in the arts.*

